

Story 1927 (1995 Tape 4)

Narrator: Hakan Ünsal, owner of a small business

Location: Istanbul, capital of Istanbul Province; but tale was taped at Antalya

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A Laz¹ Reverses a Slur

There was once a man who made Temel² very angry. Temel called that man a bad name. He called him a donkey.³ That man immediately filed a libel suit against Temel.

¹The word Laz referred originally to an ethnic minority living primarily in Trabzon and Rize provinces, along the extreme eastern part of the Turkish Black Sea coast. More recently the word has come to be applied to any resident of the entire Turkish Black Sea coast. In the Turkish oral tradition Laz people are stereotyped as being stupid or inept. This stereotype (like most others) is unjustifiable, for Lazes are, of course, much like other people.

²Temel (like Dursun) is a name given to so many Laz males that it automatically signals Laz to most Turkish audiences. Because Lazes are stereotyped as being stupid people, the name Temel may, by extension, be applied to any stupid person, whether or not he happens to be Laz.

³In Turkey the word donkey (eşek) is an abusive word when applied to a human being. It has been said that it is the second most insulting slur, and that the ultimate slur is to call a person “a donkey and the son of a donkey” (eşoğl’eşek). Sensitivity to being called a donkey is so great that whenever donkey is used in polite society, the speaker always precedes the word with the expression “Excuse me!” lest anyone present suspect that the remark is made in reference to him or to her.

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Two weeks later this case came to trial. After listening to evidence from the plaintiff, from Temel, and from three other witnesses, the judge found Temel guilty and sentenced him to eight months in jail.

Temel looked around the courtroom and saw the plaintiff smiling very broadly. This angered Temel at that man for a second. He said nothing to the plaintiff, but he spoke to the judge. “Oh, Judge Efendi,⁴ is calling a man a donkey an insult?”

“Yes, it is, son,” answered the judge. “That is why I sentenced you to eight months in jail.”

Temel then asked another question. “Oh, Judge Efendi, if I call a donkey a man, is that an insult?”

“No, it is not,” said the judge.

Temel then turned to the plaintiff and asked, “Hey, man, why are you smiling so broadly?”

⁴In earlier times the word efendi was a term of respect used in speaking to distinguished men. By the mid-20th century, however, its prestige had so eroded that it was used only while speaking to children and servants.